

Learning is NATURAL

Children start learning from the moment they are born, and there is no such thing as a reluctant learner. Infants absorb information about the world they live in. They are hardwired to do this because their survival depends upon it.

infancy and the early years are a time of accelerated learning unparalleled at any other time in our lives. A baby goes from being unable to use its body independently to being able to sit up unaided. Then comes crawling and ultimately walking. We now know that one of the crucial things in helping children learn to their optimum level is to ensure they are enjoying what is going on and feeling pleasure as a result of it. With a newborn baby this may be returning their gaze in a loving and warm way, with a slightly older infant beginning to play simple games with them – for example, picking up a spoon over and over when they deliberately drop it and making this an enjoyable, intimate play time together – the opportunities are endless.

In thinking about how to help children learn we need to take account of their age and what is appropriate for that age. One of the easiest ways to make learning unpleasant for children is to force them to do things that are beyond them or to make them carry on doing things they are no longer interested in. Doing this erodes a child's confidence and teaches them that learning is unpleasant. Take your cue from the child and follow them at their pace. Trust your child.

Early Literacy

The development of early language and literacy abilities (reading and writing) begins in the first three years of life. These developments are closely linked together. These developments are closely connected with the child's experience of stories and story telling. With babies and young infants stories may take the form of lullabies and other simple repetitive singing. As a child gets older nursery rhymes and simple stories are important. Always make time for story telling whether it is during the day or at bedtime, it is the royal road to learning.

Sharing books with young children is important. With infants who have not yet acquired language this could be giving them books with simple, large colourful pictures to handle. 'Handling' a book may mean the child chews the corner or that a cloth book is played with in the bath. At this age the point of holding books is to play with them and enjoy them. Young toddlers (12-24 months or thereabouts) sometimes enjoy

carrying a chunky book around. Children often enjoy books with animal pictures. You can make simple games by pointing to an animal and making the sound it makes. At this age books should have just a few words on each page. Older toddlers (2-3 years) often like books with simple rhymes that they can remember.

'Experiments with three day old babies have shown that they can easily tell the difference between the smell of their own mother's breast milk and that of another mother without tasting it. A baby will always turn towards the smell of its own mother's milk.'

Transitions

During school years one of the recurrent critical times is when a child or young person has to make a challenge as part of their educational progression. The first big transition comes when the child starts school and makes the transition either from home or nursery to school. Other transitions come as the child progresses from one school to another and perhaps on to college and university. Transitions are sensitive times when the young person is vulnerable as they leave behind the familiar and have to negotiate the new and unknown. There are, of course, times when leaving a school behind feels positive because the child has been unhappy there. The chance to change feels like a welcome opportunity to make a fresh start.

Transitions need careful planning. Help your child to prepare to say goodbye to people, routines and activities that have become familiar. Allow plenty of time for this but not so much that the process becomes long and drawn out. Alongside this the child needs time to anticipate their new place of learning. What will it be like? What are the things that cause apprehension? What sounds really good? Will any friends be going there, too? Anticipating and preparing for a new school or college is important.

Transitions take time, from starting to let go of the 'old' to entering the 'new'. Adjusting to change is a complex process of endings and new beginnings, some children find it easier than others. Keep a gentle eye on your child's mood and behaviour to check how they are coping. If this seems normal they are probably doing fine. But if you notice changes in them that cause concern this may be an indication that they are struggling and need some help.

Learning is a lifelong process that should open new, exciting horizons, unexpected possibilities and intriguing questions.

Northern Guild Psychological Solutions
83 Jesmond Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 0191 209 8383
77 Acklam Road, Stockton-on-Tees 01642 649 004
For information on individual consultations or courses, see
www.northernguild.org

Christine Lister-Ford. Registered Psychotherapist & Honorary Fellow
of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)
Christine is a Director of the Northern Guild.